3

A Revised British Empire

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"I am going to offer an object to the consideration of our government that may in time atone for the loss of our American colonies." So wrote James Matra, former sailor with Captain Cook's *Endeavour* voyage, on August 23, 1783.[1] Matra delivered his "Proposal for Establishing a Settlement at New South Wales" to the British secretary of state a few days before the signing of the treaty that would end the American Revolution. The sequential connection for the British empire between North Atlantic loss and Indo-Pacific atonement has existed in various forms ever since the 1780s. Pundits, players, and historians alike have invoked it either faintly or stridently for nearly 250 years. In the 1950s, the scholar Vincent Harlow gave it a name: "the Swing to the East."[2]

Implicitly, Harlow also gave this shift a political flavour – that of increasing liberties. This chapter will provide a new history of Britain's turn to the Indo-Pacific after the American Revolution, one that enriches our definition of the turn as well as reconsiders its ideological character.

Back in the 1950s, Harlow was frustrated with the long-held view that the fifty-year period between the end of the American Revolution and the Great Reform Act of 1832 was a dismal "hiatus" for the British state, defined by "apathy, neglect, and negation."[3] He thought instead that the era sowed many of the seeds for later liberalism. Harlow understood liberalism as an ideology that favoured decentralized government, free trade, and ever kinder views about the marginalized of the earth. Importantly, he found the best evidence for such an inclination in British activities between 1780 and 1830 in Asia, Oceania, and Australasia.

[1] F. M. Bladen (ed.), *Historical Records of New South Wales*, Vol. I, Part 2 (Sydney, 1893–1898), 1–6 (hereafter cited as HRNSW).
[2] Vincent T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire, 1763–1793*, Vol. I (London, 1952).
[3] *Ibid.*, 1–2.

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Harlow's general thesis soon flourished. It took particular hold among historians as the inferred backstory to many later accounts of growing antipathy to the slave trade, of increasing humanitarian initiatives, and of the advent of settler self-government. His emphasis on the Indo-Pacific also had the effect of engaging greater historical interest in the British Raj, in South Seas exploration, and in the founding of colonial Australia.

Into the 1990s, however, some key works started to apply Harlow's revisionist tendency to his own intervention. Christopher Bayly's *Imperial Meridian* in particular gave a powerful tweak to Harlow's plea for a reconsideration of the post-Revolution period. Bayly agreed that this was an era too easily overlooked in British history – an awkward changeover point between Britain's Atlantic-based empire and its globally vigorous Victorian empire. He also agreed that the Indo-Pacific was the most profitable arena in which to investigate it. But he found that, even on Harlow's own evidence, this age was marked far more by authoritarianism than decentralization, militarization over civilian rule, and a ruthlessly hardening sense of racial hierarchy. This was no "plateau on the ascent to liberalism" but rather a descent into despotic behaviors that were only defeated later by external forces.[4]

Another significant work of the 1990s was Linda Colley's *Britons*. Like Bayly, Colley saw the tenor of Britain's historical trajectory after the American Revolution change to something more autocratic than liberal. She termed this shift Britain's "sharp move to the Right."[5] Colley was more interested to trace how this move played out within the British Isles than how it unfolded in the empire's "eastern" concerns. Her depiction, however, of an increasingly elitist, monarchical, and patriotic British sensibility provided a telling domestic match to Bayly's narrative of imperial overseas pursuits in the same era.

Despite the immense influence of both Bayly and Colley on British historical scholarship, their specific insight into the nature of Britain's post-Revolution empire and culture has had only sporadic traction in subsequent historiography. Many scholars since have preferred to remind readers of the continuities in British history over the long eighteenth century. Against Harlow, Bayly, and Colley, they point to the ongoing viability of Canada and the Caribbean for the empire, the persistence of slavery as a profitable labor force, and the somewhat unexpected but much celebrated survival of

[4] Christopher A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London, 1989), 8–11.
[5] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging a Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992), 145.

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healthy commerce between Britain and the thirteen now-former American colonies. Advocates for continuity have also shown how Britain's turn to the Indo-Pacific in fact started well before 1783, kicking off with the Seven Years' War rather than in consequence of the American War of Independence. At the same time, a few more staunchly liberal (or liberalist) scholars have stuck with Harlow's original thesis (and protested against Bayly and Colley). They maintain that something changed after the American loss, but that this thing was generally what leading Britons at the time said it was – namely, a movement toward a looser set of ties between peoples, forged by laissez-faire principles and a newfound commitment to freedom.

This chapter returns to Bayly's and Colley's contention that the loss of thirteen American colonies marked a notable and mostly illiberal disruption in British imperial history for a good generation or two. It suggests that the scholarly advocates for continuity over this period focus too narrowly on economic factors or on regions in isolation. Adding ideological and institutional perspectives, as well as a more global view of the empire, offers both a broader understanding and one which demonstrates significant rupture from around the 1780s. Similarly, those who emphasize the burgeoning liberalism of the empire after American loss usually do so if tracing the experiences and proclamations of only one set of people – the British themselves. If seen through the eyes of the colonized and Indigenous peoples who came under ever greater British influence in this era, a less appealing conclusion emerges.

Examining first India, then the Pacific, then Australia, my chapter shows how the British empire became more assertive in each place from the 1780s while at the same time narrowing imperial sentiments toward jingoism at home. It also considers colonized and Indigenous reactions to these assertions, delineating how they sometimes affected the course of the "imperial meridian" despite the overall negative effect of British incursion into their homelands. Colonized and Indigenous people certainly saw British assertions as anything but an improvement on their liberties.

My account offers some details that neither Bayly nor Colley could show in their respective sweeping summaries, and it brings the three different regions of Britain's "east" together in equal measure for the first time. I argue that the British empire's survival after the American Revolution is best understood as a simultaneous refocusing on new oceanic possibilities and on a new kind of conservative imperative – or on what other historians have called a swing to the east and a swing to the right.

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INDIA

Even while British officials debated the finer details of their surrender to the American revolutionaries, some were turning their attention to the sturdiness of their then second major imperial claim, India. The once-melancholy supporter of American colonists, parliamentarian Edmund Burke, drafted in April 1783 a bill for the reform of Britain's main institution in India, the East India Company (EIC). Ostensibly, Burke wanted to prevent the same kind of collapse in British India that British America had just faced. He dressed up his ideas as a defense of "the interest and well-being of the people of India" against EIC brutality.[6] But, as historian Daniel O'Neill has recently pointed out, Burke had been fairly "uncritical" of EIC activities for decades before 1783.[7]

What likely provoked Burke, as well as his listening colleagues, in 1783 were the increasingly ominous reports emerging about the EIC's ability to maintain its hold. Although a private company chartered by the British government to trade goods in and out of the broadly defined "East Indies," the EIC had found it necessary in recent decades to employ legions of expensive soldiers to force favors and access to markets. By 1783, the EIC paid for nearly 80,000 troops, which was a quadrupling of men in only twenty years. Also, corrupt deals with local rulers involving selective monopolies, impossible loans, and an array of perquisites had damaged the functionality of the subcontinental economy. On top of all this, the EIC had endured humiliating defeats in southern India against the Marathas in 1779 and against Mysore leaders in 1780. To many, it looked like Britain's interests in India might crumble in lockstep with its position in America.

In the end Burke's bill died as a result of his faction's unpopularity. But the next year, his enemy, Prime Minister William Pitt, passed a very similar bill that began a long process of reforming the EIC. Pitt's India Act of 1784 forced the EIC to share its governance of Indian territories with the British Crown. Although it did not bring the EIC fully under the control of a British minister, as Burke had wanted, the Act did make the company accountable to both a board composed of cabinet members and a court that oversaw all financial dealings.

[6] Edmund Burke, "Speech on Fox's East India Bill," Dec. 1, 1783, in F. Canavan (ed.), *Select Works of Edmund Burke, Vol. IV (Miscellaneous Writings)*, Liberty Fund online at https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/burke-select-works-of-edmund-burke-vol-4.

[7] Daniel O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire* (Berkeley, 2016), 93.

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On the face of it, this looked like a liberal improvement on the arbitrary cronyism of the old EIC. And for Britons, in a way, it was: The changes made the British presence in India appear much more recognizable to a parliamentary people. The enlarged office of a governor-general looked a bit like a protective constitutional monarch. The extension of English law seemed a relief from an impenetrable patchwork of customs. The introduction of a fixed land tax suggested a check on privilege as well as a transparent form of revenue regulation. And, most of all, the freedom-giving properties of trade looked to triumph once again over the creeping liabilities of a militarizing organization.

For the massive majority of people on the ground in India, however – that is, for Indians – the effects of these changes produced the near opposite. The spreading powers of the governor-general resulted in a standardization and a centralization of power that was both alien and ill-fitting for many. The reforms also extended the English language further in the legal realm, ordering the rights of Indian subjects more categorically in terms of who did and who did not have access to colonial education. The land tax, first brought into Bengal and then introduced in other provinces, too often moved money out of the country entirely instead of being invested into services. One contemporary observer, Gholam Hussein-Khan, estimated in 1789 that land and other taxes had stripped the country of "four or five times" the level of cash it had enjoyed in the 1760s.[8] Many landowners simply could not pay and "were forced to sell out," ceding both centuries of tradition and the stability of food supplies.[9] Additionally, as Maratha leader Daulat Rao Sindia reflected soon afterwards, "without money it was impossible to assemble an army or prosecute war."[10] The depletion of currency destabilized, malnourished, and disarmed a population all at the same time.

Where appearances were least accurate, however, was in the projection of trade over militarization. Far from reducing the military costs of the EIC and returning to merchant concerns, Pitt's India Act instantiated an increase in troops, driven by the company's increased engagement in violent conflict in order to create markets, which often resulted in the conquest of more territories that required ever more defense. For all the years of Bayly's

[8] Seid Gholam Hossein-Khan, *A Translation of the Seir Mutaqherin or View of Modern Times* . . . [1789] (New Delhi, 1986), III, 194; IV, 21.
[9] R. K. Ray, "Indian Society and the Establishment of British Supremacy, 1765–1818," in P. J. Marshall and A. Low (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Vol. II (Oxford, 1998), 521.
[10] Cited in *ibid*., 516.

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imperial meridian, the armed force of the EIC accounted for well over half the company's costs. This ensured that the EIC never made its expected profits, which provoked continued attempts by the British Parliament to try to reform it, until it gave up the pretense and took over completely in 1858.

The paradox of professing more liberal trade but achieving only more bloodthirsty war was not lost on later observers. One cynical Anglo-Indian official noted in the 1830s that "our largest and most frequent acquisitions of territory have been made since the declaration . . . in 1784 that to pursue schemes of conquest and extension of dominion are measures repugnant to the . . . policy of the nation."[11] By the 1840s, another quipped that "the common and conventional phrase, '*that we hold India by the force of opinion*,' is mere idle talk, unless we translate the word opinion into the knowledge that the natives possess of our [military] power."[12]

These comments could be read to mean that the EIC randomly started wars out of a perverse lust to undo the implicit liberalism of Whitehall's reforms. Instead, the uptick of EIC violence – though certainly ironic – was almost always perpetrated in response to Indian defiance of Britain's new measures. Amid the grim stories of the tightening grip of the EIC after the 1780s, it is easy to lose sight of the equal resistance of locals. Mysore leaders, for example, successfully foiled fresh EIC infiltration until 1792. Punjab Sikhs did so until 1849. Indians fought back against the economic and legal incursions and coercions of the EIC, and thereby drew the British further into wars that they did not plan to fight, wasted additional EIC resources, and exasperated still more EIC officers' metropolitan superiors. Locals suffered immensely in these wars, but they were not passive elements of them: Their pushback produced its own effects on British history.

Arguably the factor that allowed the paradoxes or ironies of EIC reform to survive the imperial-meridian years was a change in the general British perception back home of expansionist efforts. Scholars interested in identifying this change have sometimes tracked it in the growing harshness of British attitudes toward non-white people. Others have focused more on the rising tide of British celebrations of their own national character. The shift may also be seen, however, in public understandings of the morality of empire. From the 1780s these became considerably simpler, narrowing an earlier diversity of opinion into a relative acceptance of the basic premise of imperialism, if

[11] Henry Russell [1832], cited in *Edinburgh Review* Vol. 71 (1840), 361.
[12] John Firebrace, 'A Chapter in the History of John Company', *United Service Journal* Vol. 3 (1844), 34.

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not always of its current methods. Without a radical critique of empire left, paradoxes could continue unchecked.

Before the American Revolution, Britons had expressed a notably wide range of ideas about the value of empire-building. Many of these ideas were fundamentally critical. The lexicographer Samuel Johnson, for instance, had articulated his disgust with empire from the 1740s, denouncing its use of slavery as "tyranny," toasting the idea of a "negro . . . insurrection" against it, declaring all its settlers to be "thieves," and characterizing every colonial invasion as an "enormous wickedness."[13] True, Johnson was no great fan of the colonized – he often assumed they were weak barbarians, which is why they could be targeted – but he did stand for an uncompromising view about their rights all the same. Others worried more about what empire might do to Britons. A street ballad from the 1730s called out the "Wealth without End" created by Britain's overseas "exploits": Its author thought that "our large commerce" had "dissolved . . . our ancient virtue [in] soft luxurious ease."[14] Scottish journalist Tobias Smollett thought similarly, though with a more materialist emphasis. In 1762, he warned that "we have already made more conquests than it is our interest to retain." Continued imperial warring, he believed, would result in only more "death . . . desolation [and] bankruptcy."[15] Imperial critique in the earlier eighteenth century was not uniform, and it does not always square with modern notions of anti-imperialism, but it surely existed as a key note in public discourse until the 1780s.

After the Revolutionary War, however, debate about empire became decidedly milder. Both Bayly and Colley note this softening, though neither elaborates on its nature or effects. In the case of India, nothing encapsulates the milder approach better than the battles that Edmund Burke professed to fight through the last two decades of the eighteenth century. As already mentioned, Burke's first attack on British Indian management in 1783 asked only for more transparent processes rather than the dismantling of those processes. The fact that the bill that defeated Burke's own produced most of Burke's same requests, and that these all turned out to worsen conditions for Indians anyway, speaks poignantly to the place of reformism in imperial situations. Five years later Burke tried to implement reform again via his attempted impeachment of the

[13] Kate Fullagar, *The Warrior, the Voyager, and the Artist* (New Haven, 2020), 67, 177; L. Damrosch, *The Club: Johnson, Boswell, and the Friends Who Shaped an Age* (New Haven, 2019), 296.
[14] *Tomo-Chi-Chi: An Ode*, reprinted in C. C. Jones, *Historical Sketch of Tomo-Chi-Chi* (Albany, 1868), 59–63.
[15] Tobias Smollett in *The Briton*, Jul. 3 and Sep. 18, 1762 .

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former governor-general, Warren Hastings. Provoking fits of crying and cascades of swooning among the public audience, the impeachment prosecution was widely regarded as "the most spectacular" attack on old imperial ways in Britain of the era.[16] Burke argued that Hastings had displayed "ferocity, treachery, cruelty . . . oppression and tyranny." But these qualities appalled him less for what they did to Indians and more because they "sullied" and "dishonoured" the name of Britain.[17] Burke defended the basic right of the British to exist as they did in India; he just wanted them to exercise their rule more politely and, if possible, more discreetly.

Like his bill in 1783, in the end Burke's impeachment prosecution failed. Tellingly, though, most Britons believed afterwards, as also after 1783, that it had resulted in a form of liberalization in colonial India. The well-known abolitionist William Wilberforce cheered that by 1790, the newly self-conscious office of the governor-general "had made the British name loved and revered."[18] Debates about what was best for British India continued into the nineteenth century, but these now focused on the number and kind of missionaries allowed in, the nature and reach of English curriculum, the extent to which local customs could be tolerated, and so on. Few voices echoed the fundamental condemnations of the earlier 1700s.

Despite the rise of the rhetoric of free trade after the American Revolution, Britain's empire in Asia on the ground produced more conflict, conquered more territory, and cast darker shadows over greater numbers of people than it had done before. Resistance was constant (and eventually sparked the downfall of the regime), but during the rest of the Revolutionary age, Indians suffered an increasingly pervasive dominion.

THE PACIFIC

As with its turn to India, Britain's renewed focus on Oceania pre-dated the American Revolution. In India, the EIC's aggressive pitch forward could be

[16] E. A. Bond, *Speeches of the Managers and Counsel in the Trial of Warren Hastings* (London, 1861), 626, 656.
[17] Edmund Burke, *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, Vol. IX (London, 1887), 337.
[18] P. J. Marshall, "Britain without America: A Second Empire?" in Marshall and Low, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, II, 584.

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said to have begun with its acquisition of the role of *Diwan* in Bengal in 1765. This was a fateful deal with the flailing leader Shah Alam for revenue-raising abilities. Just one year before, the British government had sent Captain John Byron to re-explore the economic and political possibilities of the Pacific. Byron's voyage was followed by Samuel Wallis' in 1766, and then James Cook's three expeditions of 1768–1771, 1772–1775, and 1776–1780.

But also like its involvement in India, Britain's activities in Oceania intensified markedly in both degree and kind after the American Revolution. From 1785, British officials discussed proposals to shore up their empire in the Pacific in much firmer and more detailed terms than before. They backed more entrepreneurs to set up workable relations with Indigenous people in the region, and they claimed sovereignty over certain hotspots that promised to secure fresh markets. Always, the British met with concerted resistance from locals, which sometimes altered their plans though rarely dented their simplifying worldview or their growing self-confidence.

Official discussions regarding Oceania escalated in 1785, not because of the condition of the British presence there – as per India – but because of what rival Europeans threatened in the space. In June the British ambassador in Paris wrote to his government warning that the French king, Louis XVI, was planning a major expedition to the southern hemisphere, definitely to "examine the quality" of its resources and possibly to "establish some kind of settlement there if it be found practicable."[19] French navigator Jean-François Lapérouse's consequent state-sponsored voyage spurred Britons into acting on a burgeoning fear. Long aware that rival Europeans had better stopover ports in the Global South for their imperial trades – the Dutch with the African Cape and Jakarta, and the French with Mauritius – British politicians were keen to prevent any further grabs now they felt so rumbled in the Global North. "We have lost America," intoned Member of Parliament William Dalrymple, thus "a half way house [in the southern oceans] wou'd secure us India, and an Empire for Britain."[20]

One reading of later events identifies the British establishment of New South Wales, plainly, as the chief answer to that fear. Various other replies, however, were trialed in Oceania through the following few decades. Merchant Richard Cadman Etches initiated the first when he advised the government that "opening a [fur] trade to the North West Coast of America,

[19] Letters, May–Jun. 1785, reported in Foreign Office files 27/16, National Archives, folio 553.
[20] William Dalrymple, 1785, cited in Alan Frost, *The Global Reach of Empire: Britain's Maritime Expansion in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, 1764–1815* (Melbourne, 2003), 151.

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and [to] the Coast of Asia . . . may prove of the highest value and importance to this Country."[21] Granted permission and aid to give it go, Etches introduced British pelting interests in both the Nootka and Macao regions of the Pacific as well as, critically, in the main layover islands of Hawaii. Begun in 1786, these interests boomed from the 1790s.

The Enderby family of whalers tested a second form of presence in Oceania. In 1786 they received the go-ahead to expand whaling operations westward from their usual South American base. Within just one year of catching whales off New Zealand and Norfolk islands, Whitehall officials saw "this Fishery has been wonderfully successful."[22] It pushed more Britons into Pacific waters, soon including New Guinea, Timor, the Moluccas, Tahiti, and, once again, Hawaii.

At first, the EIC was worried about the Etches and Enderby interventions, which it felt intruded on the company's gifted monopoly on the "east." Very soon, however, officials back home noticed the burst in profits coming back to Britain from the new businesses, as well as – perhaps more importantly – the strides each was making in strategic places. They reinterpreted EIC rights and allowed for the new businesses to compete against the company. Contrary to what some historians have argued on this issue, the care with which government officials always asked for botanical, zoological, maritime, naval, and geological details about Oceania suggests more than simply commercial thoroughness or the rise of modern scientific inquisitiveness. As historian Alan Frost has argued, the British state was developing an "encompassing vision" for the Indo-Pacific, one that involved expanded trade but also improved access to potential bases from which to match, fight, and grow against rival Europeans.[23] If difficult to pin on to any one politician, this vision defined the nature of the post-Revolution empire – hugely ambitious, militantly commercial, economic *and* political: adaptable, pragmatic, and ruthless.

The "encompassing vision" led to outright land grabs on several occasions, despite the stated concern with trade only. A significant instance occurred in 1790 in the Nootka Sound region (off the American northwest coast) that supplied Britain's fur trade. In January of that year the British government heard news that, some six months earlier, a Spanish ship had seized two British trading vessels because they were infringing upon Spanish claims to the whole of the northwestern American coastline. To accept this punishment would be

[21] R. C. Etches, 1785, cited in Frost, *Global Reach*, 166.
[22] Frost, *Global Reach,* 169.
[23] *Ibid*., 171–182.

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to lose access to one of Britain's most powerful wedges into the Pacific sphere. At first, Prime Minister Pitt lunged for laissez-faire arguments, threatening fully fledged war with Spain if it did not relinquish its pretensions to a place with which Spaniards could boast only flimsy and fleeting ties. Three months later, however, an owner of one of the seized ships, John Meares, turned up in London reporting that two years ago, when at Nootka, he had purchased a parcel of land from Indigenous locals, claimed it for King George III, and erected a permanent structure on the site. As Pitt probably knew, these counterclaims were just as flimsy and fleeting as anything proposed by the Spanish, given their lack of official backing, the different ways the Mowachaht understood them, and how the structure in question was just a hut quickly blown down by wind. Nevertheless, the prime minister used Meares' revelations to change tack, arguing now that Britain could justify exclusive territorial ownership of parts of the sound. British naval intimidation, together with the distraction of the French Revolution, made Spain back down. Although it lasted only a few years, Britain projected effective sovereignty over a patch of the Nootka region, all while professing non-coercive interests. The third Nootka Convention made the region a free trade port, but only after Britain's ability to secure sovereignty there had been established.

It is no coincidence that immediately after signing the first Nootka Convention, the British government ordered a state voyage to the northern Pacific. The appointed captain, George Vancouver, spent much of his three years away sailing back and forth between Nootka and the fur trade's critical stopping point at Hawaii. Vancouver tried to extend Britain's Pacific sovereign claims further in 1794 by extracting a cession from Hawaiian leader Kamehameha I of his whole archipelago. Admittedly, this claim did not make much impression back in London, but historians have been too quick to explain the apparent reticence as the natural effect of a British empire leery of grabbing land. More likely, the government felt secure enough, with Nootka supposedly sorted and with most Europeans now pushed out of the game, to let relations at Hawaii stand as they were.

Discussion of land cessions and the various states of Native–newcomer relations in the Pacific raises the issue of Indigenous roles during British incursion. What part did the Mowachaht play in the Nootka controversy, for instance, and what was Kamehameha thinking when dealing with Vancouver? In general, how did Pacific people interact with the wave of British traders, whalers, and claimants in their ocean? The Mowachaht at Nootka offer a salutary example of perseverance despite intrusion. From one perspective, the local leader, Maquinna, appears a victim of first Meares and

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then the larger British empire that wrangled a portion of his land in the sound. But another view, one both wider and longer, notes that Maquinna still visited the exchanged land whenever he chose, resettled it once the heat of the international controversy calmed down, and exacted retribution for his perceived humiliations ten years later by making several American visitors into "white slaves."[24] The British may not have felt the punishment directly, but from Maquinna's perspective – where distinctions between imperialists mattered little – his actions restored Indigenous order to this world. Kamehameha's case shows an even greater sense of overall Indigenous persistence. The Hawaiian leader never recognized his agreement with Vancouver as an act of cession in the European sense. He knew how essential Hawaii was for the multinational fur trades between America and China; at most, he thought he was bestowing the British preferential rights to be the primary protector of Hawaii against other Europeans if required. Kamehameha died in 1819 knowing that he had extracted at least as much leverage for himself through British desires than the British ever had with him.

The foregoing does not deny the significant bloodshed and illness that Pacific peoples experienced as a result of British incursion from the 1780s. British whalers, in particular, caused distress through kidnap, especially in Melanesia, or through outright violence, most stunningly the revenge killing of up to sixty Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1810. But damage does not tell the whole story of the Indigenous experience of Britain's renewed empire. An Indigenous perspective also adds the forceful reactions, powerful repurposings, and above all, constant, dogged, unstinting presence of the people who called Britain's eastern targets home.

As with Britain's determined turn to India in the late eighteenth century, Britons back in the metropole did not challenge their nation's fresh investment in the Pacific in any significantly negative way. In earlier eras, the idea of expanding the Atlantic empire into a whole additional ocean had outraged some British observers. For example, one reader reflecting on the first popular edition of Captain Cook's journals in the 1770s expressed "pain to find my countrymen . . . exercising on the harmless Indians [Islanders] a spirit peculiar, we had hoped, to Spanish invaders."[25] The *London Magazine* also felt that early British exploits in the Pacific meant only that "we have established

[24] Joshua L. Reid, *The Sea Is My Country: The Maritime World of the Makahs* (New Haven, 2015), 77.
[25] *Gentleman's Magazine* 45 (1775), 132.

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a disease which will prove ever fatal to unhappy innocents . . . we, a refined race of monsters, contaminated all their bliss by an introduction of our vices."[26] In 1780, an anonymous pamphlet commented sarcastically after hearing news of Cook's assassination in the Pacific that "poor Captain Cook was certainly very cruelly and inhumanly butchered, for nothing more than ordering his crew to fire on a banditti of naked savages, who seemed to look as if they had a right to the country in which he found them."[27]

After processing the loss of both Cook and America more thoroughly, however, the metropolitan public quietly lost its vituperative edge. By 1786, it had elevated Cook to a near-god status. The blockbuster pantomime of London for the three seasons 1786–1789, *Omai*, ended with a scene called "the Apotheosis of Captain Cook."[28] Popular poems about him celebrated now "the new Columbus" who had "quit imperial London's gorgeous plains" for the sole self-sacrificial reason of imparting "Humanity!" to "savage hearts."[29] Even David Samwell, the once-critical voyager with Cook, published an account in 1786 that decided that the Hawaiian perpetrators of Cook's death acted out of "barbarous rage," while Cook himself brought "enrichment" to the Pacific, for which Islanders were bound, one day, to be only "grateful."[30] Into the 1790s, Britons continued to discuss their nation's ventures in the southern hemisphere, but they shifted their disagreements to the goals of missionaries or the limits of government expenditure. Few if any queried whether missionaries or monies should be going to the Pacific in the name of Britain in the first place.

By the 1830s, the British enjoyed premier European imperial influence through their traders and missionaries (if not always through formal colonial governors) at Hawaii, Tahiti, Aotearoa New Zealand, Fiji, and Pitcairn. The British empire turned several of these places into their official colonies by the second half of the nineteenth century, outcomes that were the predictable consequence of decades of calculated advances rather than the accidental upshot of a unique era of liberal disinterest.

[26] *London Magazine* 46 (1775), 497.
[27] *A Letter from Omai, to the Right Honourable the Earl of* ******** (London, *c.* 1780).
[28] John O'Keeffee, *Omai; Or, A Trip Around the World*, in F. M. Link (ed.), *The Plays of John O'Keeffe* (New York, 1981).
[29] Anna Seward, *Elegy to Captain Cook* (London, 1780), 4–5.
[30] David Samwell, *A Narrative of the Death of Captain James Cook* (London, 1786); facsimile at www.gutenberg.org/files/34634/34634-h/34634-h.htm.

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AUSTRALIA

Concurrent with the vigorous drive into Pacific isles and ports was, of course, the launch of a massive new undertaking in the far south of Oceania in the form of a penal settler colony in Australia. By the 1780s, Britons knew that the inhabitants and environments of "New Holland," as they called it then, were markedly different to those of other places in the Pacific. James Cook and his naturalist Joseph Banks had returned from their first excursion to the continent in 1770 with detailed reports of the interesting fauna, accommodating flora, supposedly few and seemingly shy people, and most of all, a sense of unending land.

That Cook and Banks were motivated to record such things in such ways hints that British officials were thinking about expansion into the southern hemisphere as early as the 1760s. The uncanny dovetailing of the voyagers' observations with the ideal circumstances of a fresh New World for empire was not coincidental. But this interest went no further than exploration for more than a decade. It was only with the mounting certainty of defeat in North America that exploratory feelers turned into focused decisions.

The sailor James Matra was not, in fact, the first to recommend the government reassess its knowledge of and history with New South Wales. In 1779, Joseph Banks himself presented his opinion to a parliamentary select committee that the Botany Bay area he had visited nine years earlier might serve as a solution to one particularly pressing imperial problem. This was the question of where to send convicts now that the convenient locations of Virginia and Maryland were foreclosed. For the previous fifty years, Britain had sent around 900 convicts per year to its North American colonies, partly to address labor shortages there and partly to ease the penal system at home. In the middle of the American Revolution, Banks reminded his government of one among many alternative avenues.

The issue of convicts has deeply slanted the historiography on Australia's place in the wider British imperial world. Because all the immediate documents about Australia's founding are concerned with convicts, and because the demographic profile of the colony's first settlers was so peculiar, historical debate has generally cleaved between those who contend New South Wales was primarily about dumping excess convicts and those who argue it was about something broader. This split sits at a rather askance angle to the debate over the nature of the British empire from the 1780s. Those who push

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the convict motivation rarely identify a change in political tone one way or another; if pressed, they would assume a continuity of British illiberalism, but one begun in the mists of time and manifested in the late eighteenth century in Australia as a colony-sized prison camp. Those who see convicts as only one star among a constellation of reasons for settling Australia tend toward the more liberalist view; they concede that New South Wales may have been spearheaded by convicts but note how quickly it grew into an exemplary utilitarian, commercial, accountable, and rationalist polity.

Situating Australian settlement in the context of Britain's simultaneous extensions into India and Oceania after American loss suggests, instead, that convicts were only one aspect of the challenge confronting officials from the 1780s, but also that the decision to use convicts to forge a redemptive colony was part of a newly determined and disciplinary empire. Australian colonization was about far more than overcrowded gaols. At the same time, it was also about far less than modern notions of freedom.

Perhaps the quickest way to debunk the mainly-convicts explanation is to attend to the math. Historians have latterly realized – and the Treasury must always have known – that the convicts who were eventually sent to New South Wales cost the government roughly three times their maintenance per year if detained at home. Alan Frost shows that each was "£63 annually, as against £23."[31] More problems arise when analyzing the discourses surrounding the committees directly involved in addressing prison load. One discourse focused on European competition: In correspondence with the EIC, the secretary of state was careful to note that British settlement at New South Wales would "be a means of preventing the emigration of Our European Neighbours to that Quarter."[32] Another discourse focused on the geographical convenience of having a dedicated stopover for "our ships" in the general eastern trade that "may receive refreshments in greater plenty."[33] Still another speculated on how New South Wales might serve one day as the consumers of that trade: It was well placed, the *Morning Chronicle* argued, "for acquiring the various enriching articles of Eastern Commerce."[34] Many sources made the case for Australia's potential to supply ever-threatened stocks of timber and flax for the ever-needy British navy. As Maxwell-Stewart and Christopher have concluded, "it is safe to say that those who made the decision thought the colony would

[31] Frost, *Global Reach*, 183.
[32] Cited in *ibid*.
[33] *Morning Chronicle*, Oct. 3 and 14, 1786.
[34] *Morning Chronicle*, Oct. 21, 1786.

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result in strategic benefits, even if they were undecided about the precise nature of these."[35]

Nothing signals more the increasingly ruthless tone with which this multiply-motivated venture was made than the public debates staged in London during official deliberations on it. In October 1786, one of the most prominent debating societies, the Westminster Forum, hosted a debate on the question, "Is the intended Transportation of Convicts to Botany Bay disgraceful to a civilized Community?"[36] The framing of the debate harked back to an earlier age, which expected some to answer in the affirmative. In 1786, though, the consensus was that the proposed system seemed, if anything, "far too lenient."[37] A month later the *Morning Herald* newspaper asked, "by what rule of justice [does Britain] dare to dispossess the native of their property and authority?"[38] The answer now was resounding silence.

With strong governmental and popular backing, then, the first fleet of British settlers set off for New South Wales in May 1787. It included around 700 convicts – most of them carefully selected for their practical skills – and around 400 officers. Oddly enough, the captain and first governor, Arthur Phillip, helps to illuminate the distinctiveness of New South Wales because he proved to be an exception to the gathering rule. After a long career in the navy, Phillip was more used to the old eighteenth-century world of constant inter-European warfare and only transitory ambitions in colonial sites. He turned out to have little aptitude for a regime of Indigenous conquest and an entirely militarized civilian life. This explains why in the brief few years of his governorship he sought sincere connections with some Aboriginal people upon arrival and pledged to introduce "of course . . . the laws of [England]."[39] Going into the venture, Phillip assumed that, just as it had behaved before the American Revolution, the British empire would need Indigenous go-betweens to forge a treaty for the land one day and that eventually the colony would replicate rather than streamline the constitutional polity he knew back home.

Later governors, however, quickly put paid to both these two notions, forging some distinctly illiberal trends. None ever again sought out Indigenous go-betweens for diplomatic potential, and New South Wales

[35] Hamish Maxwell-Stewart and Emma Christopher, "Convict Transportation in Global Context, *c.* 1700–88," in A. Bashford and S. McIntyre (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Australia*, Vol. I (Cambridge, 2013), 90.
[36] See www.british-history.ac.uk/london-record-soc/vol30/pp176-193.
[37] Maxwell-Stewart and Christopher, "Convict Transportation in Global Context," 81.
[38] *Morning Herald*, Nov. 1, 1786.
[39] HRNSW, Vol. I, Part 2, 53.

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became the first territory in the British empire to be acquired without even the pretence of treaty-making. Phillip's rules discouraging British retribution against Aboriginal attack were dismissed from 1796, while Aboriginal populations faced especially concerted efforts at forced removal from the Sydney area from 1815. Within colonial society, punishments against convict transgressors became gradually more "obscene."[40] Certain markets, such as for grain, fell under complete state control. By the time of the governorship of Lachlan Macquarie (1810–1821), whole ministries operated as the governor's personal fiefdoms and "Sydney had the most extensive and complex port regulations in the British Empire."[41] Early New South Wales may have been surprisingly efficient, gratifyingly cheap, and pleasingly health-inducing for many of its inhabitants, but it hardly bore the imprint of a future "free society."[42]

As elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific, the Indigenous people of Australia reacted to British incursion vigorously and variously. During Phillip's brief initial rule, several Eora tried to meet his introductions with similarly placatory intent. Bennelong was the most successful interlocutor, forging a relationship with the governor that enabled him to gain knowledge about the British, disperse it to his fellow countryfolk, and secure personal esteem among all locals around Sydney harbor. Bennelong journeyed to Britain when Phillip returned in 1792. Shortly after he made it home again in 1795, however, Bennelong chose to leave colonial politics entirely: His impressions of the British in their original environment and especially of their succeeding colonial governors turned him off intercultural diplomacy for good. Later Eora men had fewer chances to mold peaceful relationships. Pemulwuy represented increasing numbers of Eora who realized that armed resistance might be the only viable route with intruders. He successfully waged guerrilla warfare against settlers for more than a decade before succumbing in 1802 to the official bounty placed on his head by Governor Gidley King.

Dispossession in Australia cut more deeply into the original social fabric than anywhere else in the Indo-Pacific world. British incursion there reduced the number of Indigenous people per colonist to one of the worst ratios of the modern imperial era. It did not reduce it to zero, however. The greatest act of defiance by Aboriginal people to the British empire may have been simply in surviving the onslaught, and in serving today as one of the key reasons to rethink that empire's so-called post-Revolutionary liberalization.

[40] Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers* (Melbourne, 2003), 247–248.
[41] Grace Karskens, "The Early Colonial Presence," in Bashford and McIntyre, *The Cambridge History of Australia*, Vol. I, 110–111.
[42] John Hirst, *Freedom on the Fatal Shore: Australia's First Colony* (Melbourne, 2008), ix.

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CONCLUSION

After defeat in America, Britons at home tended to become gentler on their empire when it came to India, more starry-eyed when it came to the Pacific, and arguably just plain disengaged when it came to Australia. Prior to American loss, many different quarters in Britain had shown stark censure of imperial expansion, but afterwards their criticism grew weaker. The changes in domestic sentiment regarding empire no doubt played a part in its transformation from a rather disparate enterprise to one more pervasive, aggressive, and, eventually, extensive.

Of all the possible reactions to imperial loss that the American Revolution might have prompted, it is notable that the British did not choose policies of either reclamation or retreat. Instead, they set themselves off on a course of redirection – to another oceanic region and with another ideological spirit. "Notwithstanding our late losses and calamities," wrote the English historian John Andrews in 1783, "we are yet in a situation to cherish the fairest hopes and expectations of a happy futurity . . . tho' we have not been conquerors, we yet remain unconquered."[43] This kind of determined optimism grew from the 1780s into a sense of firmer self-belief that brooked fewer doubts, risked less competition, sought greater profits, meddled more deeply, and dismissed those who got in the way.

For historians who have wished to explain – ever since Vincent Harlow – how Britain nevertheless came from the 1830s to abolish slavery, launch humanitarian societies, and even oversee settler democracy, such a conclusion may seem hard to swallow. The retrospective gaze, however, has never served the "imperial-meridian" years well. Understanding the British empire after the American Revolution from the standpoint of what had happened before, and from those who suffered empire, not only casts this period in a more dubious light. It also challenges any easy sense of causation, or indeed of what constitutes imperial liberty. Some events, such as abolition, have much more convoluted histories than is often acknowledged. Other phenomena, like colonial charity or colonial suffrage, start to look more partial or even more instrumental when set against a background of ever greater intrusion.

Colley declaimed in her magisterial book on *Britons* that "everyone knows that the War of American Independence created a new nation in the United States of America." She went on: "But it did even more than this. It helped

[43] John Andrews, *An Essay on Republican Principles* (London, 1783).

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forge a very different Great Britain."[44] The newness of that change was felt most dramatically along shores many thousands of miles away from the revolutionary center. To an extent only now acknowledged, the effects of revolutionary loss were deepest in an Indo-Pacific world that harbored more than 100 million people.

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[44] Colley, *Britons*, 145.

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